

NOTES ON REPRESENTATION: ON THE PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF MY WORK

I would like to propose a brief exploration of the personal experiences relating to the release and the public and critical reception of my films *Before the Rain*, *Dust* and *Mothers* and the advertising campaign *Macedonia Timeless*, both in Macedonia and abroad in the context of social empowerment, branding, the image of self and of the other – as perceived in these works and as reflected and refracted in the eye of the beholder.

This small presentation is only a first draft of a few personal notes on the subject.

The three films and the advertising campaign I am talking about were all made between 1993 and 2010, during the roughly first 20 years of Macedonia's independence and during the civil wars across Yugoslavia. The films were European co-productions, only partly financed by Macedonia (which participated in *Before the Rain* with 4% and in *Dust* with 5%), but set in part or fully in Macedonia – even though the themes were always universal. The advertising campaign was aimed at the potential tourist and was fully financed by the Macedonian government.

All of the films and the campaign had wide international exposure and won international awards. *Before the Rain* won 30 major international awards, including the Golden Lion in Venice, an Academy Award-nomination and a place on the New York Times list of 1,000 best films ever made.

Before the Rain consists of three love stories set in Macedonia and London against the backdrop of brewing inter-ethnic violence.

Even though British Screen was the first and major force behind the production of *Before the Rain*, the film was embraced both internationally and in Macedonia as a singularly Macedonian film. The truth is, though, that the Macedonian Ministry of Culture was far from being the initiator and motor behind the project, pulling out of the film (as did Channel 4) during development and bringing the entire enterprise on the brink of collapse, only to re-join once the filming was almost finished. It's interesting that when the film was produced in 1993, British Screen entered into a co-production with a country Britain did not even have diplomatic relations with yet.

When the film premiered at the film festival in Venice in 1994, the festival sent me a fax asking for a description of the Macedonian flag. They did not know what the flag of the new country looked like, and, indeed, the Macedonian flag on the Lido was about one-fourth of the size of all other flags.

In 1995, the film was nominated for an Oscar. The American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences surprised me at the Hollywood panel for the six nominated directors (the Cuban film *Strawberry and Chocolate* was directed by two directors) when they stopped referring to the country my film was coming from as Macedonia and started calling it the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Most Macedonians consider this name forced upon the country as insulting. I protested, but after my objection was ignored, I threatened to boycott the ceremony. The principals of the Academy repeated some formulations I had heard before from nationalistic politicians in Greece. They also told me that they were simply calling the country what the UN calls it. In turn, I pointed out that they have a nominated film coming from a country that is not even a member of the UN – Ang Lee’s *Eat Drink Man Woman* from Taiwan. The problem reached the front page of *Daily Variety*, and was resolved with an awkward compromise when Jeremy Irons introduced the film as being “from the country the filmmakers call Macedonia and the UN calls The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”.

Before the Rain was commercially distributed in 50 countries, and played at more than 120 festivals. It still screens around the world and is taught at more than a 110 universities. It is even part of the Italian high school curriculum. New DVD releases came out in Japan, the US, the UK, Italy, Turkey and Brazil more than 15 years after the film originally played there. When it opened in Japan, some newspapers printed a map of Europe next to the reviews, with an explanation how to find Macedonia on the map. They also printed explanations of how to pronounce the word Macedonia.

All of this international attention, most of it very positive, was experienced in Macedonia with great pride and joy. The goodwill surpassed anything awarded a work of art before. The nation stayed up all night to watch the Oscar ceremony in LA rooting for the film. *Before the Rain* was a social sensation of sorts. It was – and still is – very popular. When a local magazine gave out the DVD as a free supplement more than 10 years after the film premiered, it sold out the night before it officially hit the newsstands. When they offered it again the following week, the same thing happened. *Before the Rain* has been voted best film in various polls, while the title and lines from the film have entered the vernacular. Graffiti quoting lines from the film still pop up on the walls across Macedonia, 20 years after the film was released. Students demonstrating against the center-right government in 2015 carried placards with a line from the film, “Shoot, cousin, shoot”, as well as variations on it.

On a more specific level, many people responded emotionally to the film – the story, the characters, the visuals, the music. It is hard to tell where the pride at the international success of a local product ends and where the visceral and personal reactions to the work of art begin in this case, but it has become obvious that the

essence of the positive identification with the film is a result of an emotional personal viewing experience.

In Macedonia I was often approached by people who wanted to tell me how much they enjoyed the film. More interestingly, I was sometimes approached by people who wanted to complain about two things. One was the fact that some characters in the film strut around their villages with machine guns. According to the people approaching me, this was an inaccurate portrayal of life in Macedonia. The second objection was more frequent, though. Many viewers took exception to the fact that the main character, Aleksandar, rides on an old, beat-up bus. Many people were offended by the fact that this beat-up bus was seen by foreigners who saw my film. "Couldn't you show a nice, air-conditioned bus? We also drive Mercedes cars, why didn't you show that? And why is the village in the film so poor? How are you representing us? What will the world think of us?"

My explanation that I did recruit the bus after I saw it on a main street in Skopje did not register with my interlocutors. Neither did the more relevant invitation to discuss the fact that it is not the job of a work of art to "represent" anyone, or the fact that – if we want to insist on positive and negative "representation" – the nation was being "represented" in a flattering light, since the film says that it has given birth to characters of high moral values who are prepared to sacrifice themselves on behalf of another human being. Not to mention the fact that a good piece of art is the best representation a nation can ask for.

When a brief, but nevertheless devastating civil war erupted in Macedonia in 2001, many – both inside Macedonia and overseas – brought up the message of love, understanding, tolerance and cohabitation in *Before the Rain*. More interestingly, many people saw the storyline of potential ethnic conflict brewing under the surface in a society, as described in the film, as a prophecy of what came to pass seven years after the film's premiere in Macedonia. The machine guns seemed all too real now.

Yet, ever since the film opened, I was at pains to explain, clarify and repeat that *Before the Rain* was not a documentary, nor was it claiming to explain what went on in Macedonia or any other part of what used to be Yugoslavia during the bloody civil wars at the turn of the 21st century. I had repeated this hundreds – if not thousands – of times in a number of interviews and conversations with viewers over 20 years. I was happy when on several occasions viewers approached me to say, "What we saw in your film could easily have happened in my country."

What we had in Macedonia at that point in 2001 was a real war. Not a film war. I don't believe in art commenting on politics. But I believe in – sometimes – expressing your opinion in public. I wrote an opinion piece about the civil war in Macedonia. In

short, I felt that it was not a war for human rights, as it was being portrayed then, but rather a war for political power and territory which was – in part at least – the result of a blowback from the NATO operation in Kosovo. A spillover, in other words. I also said that it should be seen as an issue of law and order and not an issue of inter-ethnic conflict – the way a case of someone killing policemen in California and demanding a bilingual parliament would be seen in California.

Roughly a month after I published this commentary in the Guardian and Süddeutsche Zeitung (Das Staandard and Pravda picked it up without even asking for permission), my second film *Dust* opened the film festival in Venice. It is an irreverent film of fractured narrative which takes us from contemporary New York City to the Wild West to the Ottoman Empire, as the story and the tone constantly shift between the tragic, the comic and the absurd.

Much to my surprise, this über-fiction film was perceived as my commentary on the current civil war in Macedonia. The thinking was perhaps that if there are two things on the front pages of the world newspapers at the same time, both coming out of this small country, they must be related. The fact that I spoke my mind about the nature and reasons of the war tearing the country where I was born apart probably contributed to the inability of the critics to separate the work of art from the political opinion.

Most Venice reviewers of *Dust* discussed what they were convinced was my commentary on the 2001 civil war in Macedonia. Never mind the fact that the war was unfolding as the film premiered, and was only a few months old. I had been making the film for seven years, and completed filming it at least six months before the war started in earnest. Some articles in this perfect case of groupthink even managed to see me using this film to make a call to arms against the Moslem world.

This type of brutal attack on the film was seen by the Macedonian public as a bias against Macedonia. Many observers felt that the Western press fell for anti-Macedonian propaganda and gladly amplified it, as it fit a neat master-narrative, a continuation of the purified “oppressed” and “oppressor” Kosovo stories wildly popular during the Kosovo war. An article in a Macedonian newspaper about the initial international reaction to *Dust* abroad was titled “The West with a Skeleton in Its Closet.” The film broke all records for audience attendance in the country that year (as did all my films), and is still screened on national television.

In later years, *Dust* was the international subject of numerous essays and articles, some of them quite extensive. It was also a subject of an academic conference at the University of Leipzig. A few of the initial critics retracted their attacks on the film, but overall it remains a case of a film discussed for perceived (or projected) ideology

and politics and not for its aesthetics or philosophy. It also remains a film discussed by many who have not seen it.

Several years later, I was approached by the Macedonian government and asked to create a tourist commercial for the country. At first, I demurred, but later I accepted the challenge. I conceived of and executed the commercial like a quirky modern film about a mythical country, a real-life Atlantis, a country of real-life legends along the lines of a Tibet or a Machu Picchu. I felt that Macedonia did not have known destinations, great beaches or beautiful cities to offer, but its unique history and its rich cultural heritage could be singularly attractive to an experienced traveler. We highlighted relics and characters from cultures and civilizations that have left a mark on the land (and there has been many) – Neolithic people, the church of Cyril and Methodius, ancient Macedonians and Romans, Ottomans, and contemporary Westernized, yet at heart Mediterranean, Macedonia.

The piece itself, even though only 60 seconds long, made a strong contribution to the ongoing dialogue about the national identity and the modern reflection of the historical context. Many historical themes and epochs have been a taboo or have been vulgarized for long periods. Bringing them out into the sun and refracting them through a very contemporary prism felt like the right thing to do.

This especially in light of the current government's strong focus on history, especially on Alexander the Great and the ancient Macedonians.

The commercial first aired on CNN, and – after it was dubbed in a dozen languages – on more than a dozen national TV outlets in the UK, France, the US, Germany, Russia, China, etc. It won awards for the creative approach and was often praised as imaginative and inspiring. I received emails from Macedonians overseas describing how proud it made them because they felt that they were looking at a superior product – the commercial, but also the underpinning culture.

Still, within minutes of the unveiling of the commercial a wave of virulent attacks rained down upon it in Macedonian cyberspace and then in the Macedonian media. Many of the online comments picked up and amplified by the opposition media echoed same or similar themes, as if coming from one brain.

The comments I found particularly interesting were not those that tried to manufacture a case of plagiarism (a member of parliament, a former Prime Minister, stated from the lectern that the experts had agreed that the spot is a case of plagiarism¹), the price tag or presumed sloppy craftsmanship, but rather those that

¹ I have been offered the position of government minister by both the left and the right; I have also been attacked from the parliament floor by both; I have also been attacked by both the media friendly to the left and to the right, respectively.

focused on “how we are represented.” There is incredible sensitivity to this issue in Macedonia. This time there was even less openness for the point of view of the other and the fuse was shorter. Some felt there were not enough shots dealing with Islamic themes or objects, others did not want to “be represented” by (six seconds) of folk dancers. Some felt particular geographic regions within the country were underrepresented, others objected to the choice of a particular location for a single image in the commercial, as it did not match their interpretation of the folk song the image was referring to.

I would disregard the intense political battles waged on the back of this 60-second commercial, and focus instead on the bitterly contested issue of representation. It suggests an obsession with the image of self, especially as seen “by the others”. It is peculiar that the conversation about the representation almost never leads to conversation about changing the “reality” that is “represented” or that a viewer feels has been misrepresented.

In the wake of this commercial, I agreed to expand it and to create and direct an entire campaign for Macedonian tourism.

And, partly as a reaction to the reaction, I felt compelled to tackle head-on the issue of truth and representation in my next feature project. It was to be another triptych, but this time based on true stories. Half of the film was going to be an actual documentary. The title of the film is *Mothers*.

This is the first time I set out to deal with reality as a tissue of my films. I always try to stay faithful to the facts and do a lot of research before embarking on making a film², but I believe that a work of art has an obligation to a higher reality, to the essence of the human condition, rather than to a repetition or clarification of facts.

The first story of *Mothers* takes place in a city, the second in the countryside, the third in a small town. They all deal with the way we treat each other as human beings, but also they meticulously reconstruct the lifestyle in these three environments. Actually, what inspired me to make the film was that which was lurking under the story of serial murders and utter incompetence of the judicial system – the stifling, suffocating over-interconnected lifestyle in a small Mediterranean town.

Since the film deals with real events and features real people, and since it talks of traumatic events for most participants, I was particularly careful and eager to stay truthful to the facts. I screened the film for the participants in the documentary before

² The (unpublished) bibliography of *Dust* consists of some 160 entries, mostly about the American Wild West and Macedonia in the Ottoman Empire.

releasing the film, and was pleased to see that none of the people with conflicting interests and opinions objected to it.

In spite of its heavy subject and the fact that half of it is a documentary, the film went on to be the best attended film in Macedonia that year, the country's candidate for the Oscars, and the winner of seven international awards after touring close to 40 festivals. The film premiered at the Toronto and Berlin film festivals – a prestigious unveiling for a small, quirky, and in many ways experimental film.

In spite of this success, the cultural decision-makers did their best to bury – and even ban – the film. Its international life was made difficult, if not almost impossible. The state funding for international distribution and marketing, common even for films with less auspicious unveiling, was cut off. The Macedonian Film Fund sat on the application requesting subtitling and a festival print for the international premiere of the film until a month after the premiere, then rejected the request. The film traveled to some 40 festivals with absolutely no logistical or financial state support. The pro-government press attacked both the film and the filmmaker. There was financial police intimidation. The pending projects were cancelled or sent to die slow death in a bureaucratic maze, the contract obligations were ignored.

I was told directly by two highest-ranking officials in the Government that they were not satisfied with the film. It was not “portraying” the country and – more importantly – the party in a way they deemed appropriate. The only specific objection, however, was to a particular shot where the party symbol (a lion) can be seen on the wall behind the local chief of police. It did not matter that the symbol had nothing to do with the story nor “message” of the film, nor that – as this was a documentary – we did not place it there; the chief of police himself had. It was his office. These objections came as a surprise to me, since the film is not overtly political, nor ideological, nor does it concern itself with politics or with the party in power.

At the same time I was not surprised, as I have learned to expect that the beauty is in the eye of the beholder. I have also learned that power structures often need not see real reasons for objecting, but rather react from the gut, instigated by a sense of paranoia. It is as if they are saying, “If something feels like it is aimed at us, even if there is nothing I can put my finger on, then that is enough. I don't like it. I don't like its tone.”

This type of objection aimed not at the so-called representation of reality, but rather at the tone, at the undefined feeling a work of art creates is the ultimate type of censorship. Both the Soviet Social Realism and Hollywood formula want to control the stories the authors tell, but even more so the type of feelings the authors deal with and initiate in the viewer. It is the tone, stupid. This is even more insidious, as it takes us all

further from rational definition and rational dealing with the issue of censorship. It subjects the works of art and intellectual undertaking to the “gut” of the autocrat.

Mothers is my only film where I try to get into how people really live – in Macedonia, but also in general. So, the answer to the perennial question “How do you represent us” this time would be – accurately.

As postscript, while putting together these few personal notes on how viewers from different backgrounds and with different agendas utilize and respond to my work in regards to the image of self and the other, I remembered that the US State Department screens *Before the Rain* on a regular basis for its officials and employees assigned to or moving to Macedonia. I cannot escape the feeling that they are showing the wrong film.

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